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Involve Citizens in Land Use Planning



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Involve Citizens in Land Use Planning

By: Arnold J. Bateman, Area Rural Development Specialist

Many comprehensive land use plans have been developed in the past but never implemented. Often these plans end up on a shelf because those responsible did not involve the people within the area for which the plans were developed. This fact sheet discusses the importance of citizen participation in land-use planning, so financial and human resources will not be wasted because of an unused plan.

Who Is Concerned About Land Use?

In one way or another we are all concerned about the use of land. For example: farmers and ranchers are concerned about land uses that restrict the operation of their agriculture enterprises. Others are also concerned about using highly productive farmland for non-farm uses, which may reduce the total production of food and fiber.

Homeowners wonder about the effect it may have upon the value of their property. They desire pleasant neighborhoods that provide a suitable environment for living and for maintenance of property values.

Businessmen are concerned about land use as it relates to locating their businesses, expanding operations and maintaining a favorable business climate.

Recreationalists are concerned about land use as it relates to private and public recreational areas now and in the future.

Public officials - local, county, state, and national - try to look at general public interest and strive to establish land use policies that will meet the needs of all. Local government officials are especially concerned about possible changes in the tax base.

Why Participate?

There are many reasons why it's important for citizens of a community (city, county, state or region) to be involved in the development and implementation of comprehensive land use plans.

A comprehensive land use plan cannot effectively meet community goals unless it reflects the desires, aspirations, wants, needs and problems, as well as opportunities of the community, and the people who comprise it. Moreover, to have a land use plan that is the community's land use plan (not one that represents only the professional planner, other outside experts, elected officials, or just a handful of people) requires that the citizens within the community be involved from the time the plan is conceived until it is completed and implemented.

Ultimately, before a land use plan can be officially adopted by a community, approval by elected public officials is necessary. Once the plan is adopted, public funds are usually required to implement the plan, and these funds must be appropriated by an elected body of public officials.

Land use planning can be very controversial. Elected public officials may be reluctant to adopt the plan unless widespread public support is evident. This support can best be secured by actively involving the citizens of the planning area.

The involvement of a community's citizens must be real. Professional planners, consultants or elected officials should never try to use a group of citizens as a "rubber stamp".

The citizens involved must not only represent the whole community, but they must also keep the whole community in mind when making or influencing development and implementation of the comprehensive land use plan. This concept is probably more pertinent in land use programs than in any other community development endeavor because of the implications of such programs and the potential for conflicts.

The importance of citizen participation and involvement in public policy decisions, such as land use planning, has been recognized for many years. In his message on community development to congress in March, 1963, President John F. Kennedy stated: "Only when

the citizens of a community have participated in selecting the goals which will shape the environment, can they be expected to support the actions necessary to accomplish these goals."

Professional Planners and the Involved Citizenry

Professionals (private consultants, staffs of public agencies, Extension educators and specialists in various fields) and citizens have different but complementary roles to perform during the development and implementation of a comprehensive plan. It is important that planners and citizens cooperatively carry out their duties, but each must understand and recognize his specific role if misunderstandings are to be avoided.

All major decisions in planning for the community should be made by the community through its voluntarily involved citizens and/or elected officials. The professional planners should advise, provide technical knowledge to the community and suggest alternatives, but should not make policy decisions themselves. Planners can influence the decisions being made, but the final decision-making power should rest with the community.

Without citizen involvement, the professional planner assumes or prescribes community objectives which may or may not reflect the goals of the people living in the community. When this happens there is a real risk that the land use plan will not be accepted by the community, and the time and expense involved in preparing the plan will be wasted.

The role of involved citizens is to serve as an educational arm and as a clearing house of information for both the professional planners and the broad community they represent. Through participation in the planning process, citizens of a community become informed; in turn, professional planners become informed about the community by working closely with such citizens.

Citizen involvement, properly done, invariably lessens friction and misunderstanding between citizens

of a community and professional planners, helping to develop a better working relationship and a more acceptable comprehensive plan.

Who Should Be Involved?

Ideally, every citizen of a community would participate in the process of developing and implementing a comprehensive land-use plan, but this is seldom practical. If citizen involvement is approached right, it is possible to obtain a broad representative group of citizens who can speak and act for the whole community. This should be the minimum goal to be achieved by the community in the planning process.

Professional planners and community leaders who are actively involved in developing and executing land-use plans should constantly strive to involve as many people as possible, representing all interests, factions and organizations within the community.

No group or groups of individuals should be excluded from participation, intentionally or unintentionally. The degree of participation will determine the extent to which the believability gap is narrowed between decision-makers and those who are affected by their decisions. While everyone cannot and will not actively participate, every group or organization can, at least, have its concerns expressed and considered.

Methods For Involving Citizens

Community-wide educational meetings on the proposed comprehensive plan, sub-division ordinance, zoning map and zoning ordinances can contribute much to the planning process. Such meetings are in addition to the required public hearings and should be used as an educational method for increasing citizen awareness and obtaining public ideas and opinions.

Preliminary copies of the proposed ordinance might be distributed through the public library and/or the local post office in each of the involved towns. When done in conjunction with a mass media program two to three weeks before the educational meetings, interested citizens can pick up a copy of the proposed ordinance for study and formulate their questions of

concern. The educational meetings might then serve as a question and answer session from which both the citizens and elected officials may benefit. It is suggested that separate meetings be held for each of the following: (a) comprehensive plan, (b) subdivision ordinance, and (c) zoning map and zoning ordinance.

The rationale for using this process is two-fold:

(a) Citizens have an opportunity to respond at a stage where plans are not yet finalized.

(b) Citizens have the opportunity to become knowledgeable before the public hearing is held, helping to reduce some of the tensions involved in having an ordinance rejected at the hearing.

Other suggested methods for involving citizens:

* Publish planning newsletters for public distribution concerning the planning program and progress and the planning board's business and activities.

* Use the daily and weekly newspapers, radio and television stations to report planning matters to the

public. Better yet, invite their representatives to attend the planning meetings.

* Keep the discussion meetings open to the public and hold them with community leaders, professional planners and educators, so they get the maximum benefit from feedback or discussions that develop.

* Elected officials, planning commission members and others involved should appear before various organizations, groups, clubs, etc., to discuss community problems, planning goals and concepts, zoning ordinances, the zoning map and other important items.

* Mail questionnaires to a representative cross-section of citizens to obtain input on specific questions.

* Encourage people from your community to visit areas that have present or potential land-use problems and areas that have effective land-use planning.

Since the general objective of the whole planning process is to provide, in every respect, a better environment for the people, the citizens of the planning area must be given the opportunity to take part in the planning process.

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